CUCKOLD

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One of the premises underlying this novel is that an easy colloquial currency of language will make the concerns, dilemmas and predicaments of the Maharaj Kumar, Rana Sanga, and the others as real as anything we ourselves are caught in: a birth, divorce, death in our families; political intrigue, a national crisis, or a military confrontation in the life of our nation. The idea was to use contemporary idiom so long as the concepts we use today were available in the sixteenth century. For example, the measurement of time, theories of education, war strategies, music, the functioning of bureaucracy, etc. I was striving for immediacy, rather than some academic notion of fidelity, at best simulated.

Major Characters

RAJPUT KINGDOM OF MEWAR • CAPITAL: CHITTOR

Maharana or Rana Sanga	–	King of Mewar
Maharaj Kumar	–	The Rana's eldest son and heir apparent
Vikramaditya	–	The Rana's third son
Rani Karmavati	–	The Rana's favourite queen and Vikramaditya's mother
Kausalya	–	The Maharaj Kumar's 'dai' or the woman who breast-fed him
The Princess	–	The Maharaj Kumar's wife
Kumkum Kanwar	–	The Princess' maid
Adinathji	–	Finance Minister
Leelawati	–	His granddaughter
Lakshman Simha	–	Home Minister
Rajendra	–	His eldest son
Tej	–	His younger son
Pooranmalji	–	Prime Minister
Mangal Simha	–	Head of Intelligence; Kausalya's son
Sunheria	–	A washerwoman
Bruhannada	–	Rani Karmavati's chief eunuch
Rao Viramdev	–	Ruler of Merta and uncle of the Princess
Puraji Kika	–	A Bhil chieftain

MUSLIM KINGDOM OF GUJARAT • CAPITAL: AHMEDABAD

Muzaffar Shah II	–	Sultan of Gujarat
Bahadur Shah (Shehzada)	–	His second son

MUSLIM KINGDOM OF MALWA • CAPITAL: MANDU

Mahmud Khalji II	–	Sultan of Malwa
Medini Rai	–	His Rajput prime minister and later, his enemy
Hem Karan	–	Medini Rai's son
Sugandha	–	Medini Rai's daughter

MUSLIM KINGDOM OF DELHI • CAPITAL: DELHI

Ibrahim Lodi	–	Sultan of Delhi
Babur	–	Invader from Central Asia and founder of the Moghul dynasty
Humayun	–	Babur's eldest son

Acknowledgements

'There's no way we'll publish an acknowledgement as long as your book,' my publishers told me. This was a gross misrepresentation of the facts. First of all, *Cuckold* is not a long book, just a bare 600 pages when the norm today in turn-of-the-century fiction is 670 to 1437 pages. Secondly, my original acknowledgements were not even a round five hundred pages. Since publishers have the last word in all matters, I'm constrained to do an abridged and utterly inadequate page and a half of thank you's. My apologies to all those good people who the publishers will not allow me to name and thank.

Ramchandra Rao had no idea of what I had in mind (nor did I) but he was instrumental in organizing my visit to Udaipur and Chittor and placed me in the hands of Nitin Tirpude and Rajiv Sharma. Why Nitin and Rajiv should have put themselves out to such an extraordinary degree will always remain a mystery to me. I wouldn't have had the help of these gentlemen, and all the other kinds of help without the silent support of my old friend, Daljit Mirchandani.

Sunanda Herzberger got loads of reference books from the library. Out of the blue, Tulsi Vatsal – I'll come back to her again – bought me a copy of *Baburnama*. Fate, serendipity, the grand design, whatever you choose to call it, the book was coming together.

If Babur plays a crucial role in my novel, it is due, to a great extent, to Annette Susannah Beveridge's translation of the *Baburnama*. How does one doff one's cap to a dead author except to recommend her to all those who are interested in exceptional

literature?

Nancy Fernandes got acidity, lost her 20:20 eyesight but typed and retyped the manuscript without complaint. Rekha Sabins, the translator of my novel *Ravan and Eddie*, was the willing(?) victim of my first, and largely incomprehensible readings from *Cuckold* as it was being written. Tulsi Vatsal played Mahmud of Ghazni, Timur and Jenghiz Khan rolled into one and lopped off close to a hundred pages. Her sharp critical insights and cuts made *Cuckold* a tighter and far better book.

I'm grateful to my friend Pervin Mahoney for her comments, initial editing and encouragement. And to Nita Pillai for further vetting the book. How shall I thank my friends Hira and Adrian Steven? Their patience was close to infinite. Every word, line, paragraph and chapter was scrutinized, every suggestion annotated and discussed. Never mind the inadequacy of the words, thank you both, again. Meena and Vijay Kirloskar have stood by me, and when the going's been tough, given me a sense of perspective with wry humour and encouragement.

Whatever the shape of my gratitude, most of it is related to the fact that these people believed in the venture. Among the believers, I must especially mention my friend, Octavia Wiseman. She has stood by *Cuckold* through some difficult times. I'm grateful that she never gives up. That leaves my editor at HarperCollins, Priyakshi Rajguru. Like most soft-spoken people, she knows her mind. I'm glad that her mind was set upon *Cuckold*.

Chapter 1

The small causes court sits on Thursdays. When Father's away I preside. There were fourteen plaints to be heard. I dealt with them all, albeit as the sun rose to the meridian and then crossed it, I became impatient. The seventh was the most interesting, perhaps because it was not about being done out of money or land but afforded a change of pace and a bit of humour.

An old, bent dhobi, I would have sworn it was the same washerman who besmirched Sita's name and obliged Lord Rama to banish her into the wilderness some two thousand years ago, was now casting aspersions on his wife's virtue.

'She has a lover, maybe several,' his voice was thick with chronic bronchitis and he had to clear his throat many times before he could speak.

'Do you?' I asked his wife. She couldn't have been more than sixteen or seventeen. How naive, or hypocritical, can one get in court? Did I really expect her to smile demurely and tell the court who she was sleeping with?

I was sitting in a small semi-hexagonal balcony which jutted out from the sheer rear wall of the palace my great grandfather Maharana Kumbha had built. She and the other litigants stood fifteen feet below. Her head was covered with a green and yellow bandhani chunni which was tucked into the cleavage of her blouse. I was sure I had seen that chunni before. The sun got into her eyes when she raised her head to answer me. She bent forward and drew the silk covering her head down, to shield her eyes. Her ivory bangles, each bigger than the previous one, clattered down into the angle at her elbow. Her breasts, the colour of fine sand at Pushkar, were exposed for a brief second. I could feel Mangal's eyes at the back of my neck.